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ABSTRACT

This document addresses the role of what is termed "general education" in the present university system. The teaching of the liberal arts is of primary importance in order to preserve an accurate knowledge of the past. If universities do not satisfy this need, the population will be easy targets for business and political communities peddling an imagined past in order to get people to buy or believe something. The university fosters disconnectedness by stressing innovation and practicality, especially at the undergraduate level where subjects are over specialized, departments within schools are isolated, and students are encouraged, if not required, to hem themselves in with artificial boundaries and to conceive of themselves and their possibilities in diminished fashion. The document describes The reform movement in general education that began in the 1970s as a reclamation project, an attempt to bring into some balance a curriculum that had been all but totally devoured by majors is outlined. The students' greatest deficiency is ignorance of their history and culture. This ignorance of history can cause serious problems because a generation of citizens has been raised conditioned to make political decisions divorced from knowledge, analysis, or reflection about what might be the wisest or best course. Intimately connected to, and existing simultaneously with the loss of history is the loss of sensitivity to language. Only through language can people overcome the disconnectedness so predominant in the education system. (DK)

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WHAT PASSES FOR THE NEW

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WHAT PASSES FOR THE NEW

That most innovative of poets, William Carlos Williams, has warned us about the dangers of 'newness' and innovation. Since few respected genuine innovation as much as he, we should take his words to heart. "Look at what passes for the new," he said. "You will not find it there but in despised poems."

All innovation ought to be viewed with suspicion, or at least skepticism. This is especially true in the Liberal Arts. The university has a dual, some would say, impossible mission--preservation and innovation. It would not mis-state the matter to assert that innovation depends on preservation. Both stability and change are essential; what is preserved provides a recognizable and inheritable body of knowledge upon which innovation can be based. Paul Valery has said that every achievement in science or the arts:

> either repeats or refutes what someone else has done, refines, or amplifies, or simplifies it, or else rebuts, overturns, destroys or denies it, but thereby assumes it and has invisibly used it.
> ("Letter to Mallarme")

It is of primary importance that the Liberal Arts take its role as preserver or conservator seriously. Our students must be engaged with the great thinkers and writers of the past. If this is not done by universities, the need will be satisfied by others, and for their own ends--primarily by the business and political communities pedaling an imagined past in order to get people to buy or believe something.

This important function is often consigned in universities to the "General Education" portion of the curriculum, and a criticism often levelled against such programs is that they lack "coherence," that the parts don't add up to a unified whole. A solution often proposed to remedy this (real or imagined) deficiency is to teach "thematic" or "interdisciplinary" courses. These approaches have a very spotty history, but that is not my chief objection to them. My main problem is that such proposals place too heavy a burden on General Education; they require <u>it</u> to achieve a coherence and order which the rest of the university does not <u>have</u>, and actually works <u>against</u>. The university as it is presently structured fosters disconnectedness--there is little doubt that at the under-graduate level it is

overspecialized, that departments even within schools are isolated, that students are encouraged (if not required) to hem themselves in with artificial boundaries and to conceive of themselves and their possibilities in diminished fashion. In such a situation, it simply won't do to point to one segment of the university curriculum and say--"Correct our shortcomings with a few required units."

There is yet another difficulty with such courses. It is rare that the university can effectively deliver them. As Page Smith has said in his recent book, Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America:

> . . . the universities' collective heart is not in the enterprise. To teach such a course in lectures in a style that will captivate and hold the attention of restless and inattentive young people with a thousand more pressing things on their minds requires great gifts of intellect and personality--such qualities as passion, conviction, wide knowledge, and genuine cultivation, as well as a gift for explicating as integrating complex and unfamiliar ideas and generalizing major themes. These qualities are, needless to say, in short supply in the university. The great majority of the faculty are neither interested in nor capable of organizing and teaching such a course.
>
> (p. 146)

The reform movement in General Education which began in the 70's was, and is, primarily about trying

to save something in danger of being lost. It was, and is, a reclamation project, an attempt to bring into some balance a curriculum that had been all but totally devoured by majors. Innovation did not provide the main impetus; rather, it was an attempt to re-claim for certain subjects their rightful place in the university curriculum, regardless of specialization or career interests.

I believe our students' greatest deficiency to be their ignorance of their history and culture. This past spring, I ran into a young colleague in the hall as he came out of an argumentation class. He had just attempted to preside over a political discussion, which he characterized to me as the most mindless discussion he had ever heard. I countered with the remark that his students were, after all, very young. He said, "They've all got the vote."

They <u>do</u>, don't they? And the ballot box is only <u>one</u> place where their glaring ignorance of their history can cause serious problems--we have raised a generation of citizens who have been conditioned to make political decisions divorced from knowledge, analysis, or reflection about what might be the wisest

or best course. Serious matters of leadership and national policy are made by individuals whose knowledge has been derived from "sound bytes," and whose interest is self-interest conceived of in the narrowest possible terms.

Effects of this loss surround us. Most of my students finds themselves at a loss with much of the art and literature of the past because they have no knowledge of (or interest in) the context which produced it. The body of common knowledge that was once shared by the intellectual elite is now lost. But the past influences us whether we are aware of it or not, whether the knowledge of it is widely shared or not. T.S. Eliot has told us that the important thing to be aware of is not the pastness of the past, but its continuing and influential presence.

There are many reasons for this. During the Victorian Period, it was thought that the training of technicians was of higher priority. Also, the egalitarianism of the time looked with suspicion on "high culture," with its aristocratic associations. When Matthew Arnold visited America, they thought he was a snob.

A. Bartlett Giamatti says that Ralph Waldo Emerson must bear some of the blame for this. Emerson, he claims, is responsible for American xenophobia, suspicion of custom, and conscious separation from the past. Each individual was "his own pure source" and he asserted that "every native strain in his character was linked with Higher Nature." It was an important part of his intent to persuade Americans to be independent, to sever ties with Europe--he wanted Americans to be different and original, culturally, politically, and intellectually from whatever had been fashioned before. Part of our cultural conditioning produces a scorn for the past, a desire for innovation and originality in all things. We are slaves of the "new." The final result, Giamatti claims, is:

> . . . that unstable strain in us that would have us begin all over again every morning . . . that naive energy that legitimizes those gusts of moralistic frenzy masquerading as high principle that periodically seize us by the throat and that, while always comfortable and nostalgic, are never truly attentive to history . . . .
> (A Free and Ordered Place, 102 ff)

Having lost it, we try to will it back into existence. Politicians invoke a Rockwellian vision of an America that never was, and urge us to support them

in their effort to restore it. Models of past excellence, which in former times were the spur to new work, have for most been lost. Charles Jencks says that:

> . . . Architects (now) employ classical motifs in a witty or ironic way, as if embarrassed to be caught admiring them. (Post-Modern Classicism, pp. 354, 375)

What historical knowledge there is, is unstructured, unconnected, and eclectic. We take comic books and baseball cards as seriously as we do Greek Tragedy. We are, we are told, in the "Postmodern Period," and all previous bets are off. The founding assumption of the Western university, that reality is knowable through reason, William Pfaff argues, is no longer believed:

> . . . Postmodern thought holds . . . that reason has become "pluralized," and relativitized, and that reality is indeterminate. Knowledge exists only as "regimes" of knowledge, which is to say as political systems (an academic department or intellectual school, for example) that dictate that certain things are so, and use power, pain, and reward to make this accepted.
>
> (In Their Crisis, Universities Can't Shove Truth Down the Memory Hole," Los Angeles Times, 30 December, 1988)

We are having a great deal of trouble incorporating our intellectual legacy into our daily or creative life. Loren Eisely says that:

> We appear to be living amidst a meaningless mosaic of fragments. From ape skull to Mayan temple, we contemplate the miscellaneous debris of time like sightseers to whom these mighty fragments, fallen gateways, and sunken galleys convey no present instruction.
> (Unexpected Universe, p. 6)

I have said that the university, in its structure and in its purpose, fosters disconnectedness. Being disconnected from our past, and hence from ourselves, is perhaps the most serious of all the disconnections.

Intimately connected to, and existing simultaneously with the loss of history is the loss of sensitivity to language. The Liberal Arts are primarily word-centered activities, engaged most importantly in the interpretation of texts. I have a logocentric bias, and I make no apology for it, I teach literature in part because I am interested in language, and in all inquiries that are word-centered. Language is the bearer of all our most important traditions, and is the only medium through which we can have any chance at all of understanding our lives, both as individuals and as a people.

It is only through language that we can overcome the disconnectedness I spoke of earlier. I view with suspicion contemporary theories of criticism that

question language's power to represent reality. There have been recent attempts to cancel history; the focus is on the system, the structure--we seem to be at a place where all truth (excepting scientific and mathematical truth) is political, a matter of who holds the power. Language is viewed as the special province of the College of Liberal Arts, another specialization, not a shared acquisition. And, it is conceived of primarily in an instrumental way--language used for particular ends, technical reports, business communication, and the like.

One form this insensitivity takes is an obdurate literalism; clear denotative language is the ideal, in all cases. What this view overlooks is that there is no such thing as literal language. Metaphoric language dominates us; figures of speech pervade all language, arguments are for the most part metaphorical. J. Hillis Miller goes so far as to assert that all original thinking is stated metaphorically, and that the true opposition is not between the metaphorical and the literal, but between figurative language and no language at all. He says:

> . . . my argument is that if both teachers and students of rhetoric . . . do not aim to

> become as good readers as Plato (or) George Eliot . . . as wise in the ways of tropes, they will not learn to be good teachers or practitioners of writing either . . . we must make sure we base our rhetoric . . . on the deepest possible knowledge of what good reading would be . . . the 'command of metaphor' . . . is the key that opens all these doors.
>
> ("Composition and Decomposition: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Writing," 49 ff)

Figurative language is not a detachable part of language, isolated in university literature courses where it is the concern of only a specialized few. Neither is it supplemental, ornamental, or a matter of choice. The understanding of its nature and an awareness of its power and pervasiveness are among the most important effects of all literary education. I argue that these ought to be the effects of all liberal education. When my students ask me, "What is literature", my response is "What isn't?"

It is therefore unwise and not especially productive to consider General Education apart from the curriculum as a whole. I have said that the university, far from being a cooperative venture in which there is agreement about what it tries to accomplish, is in fact, isolated, disconnected, and

fragmented. At no level is this more evident than in the individual disciplines. Once established, disciplines tend to fragment into sub-sets--and each time this happens, the distance between what goes on in the discipline and the concept of shared knowledge becomes greater.

Nothing is more dangerous to the understanding and perpetuation of the Arts and Sciences than the idea of 'practicality.' Wendell Berry says that it is the concept which dominates universities, to their very great detriment, and it is defined in a very specialized way. The term, he says:

> . . . has been defined for us according to the benefit of corporations. By 'practicality' most users of the term now mean whatever will most predictably and most quickly make a profit. Teachers of English and literature have either submitted, or are expected to submit, along with teachers of the more 'practical' disciplines, to the doctrine that the purpose of education is the mass production of producers and consumers. This has forced our profession into a predicament that we will finally have to recognize as a perversion. As if awed by the ascendancy of the 'practical' in our society, many of us secretly fear, and some of us are apparently ready to say, that if a student is not going to become a teacher of his language, he has no need to master it.
>
> (A Continuous Harmony, 1972)

I will leave the concept of "professionalism" for

another time; suffice it to say that for the present the notion may have done us more harm than good. Being "professional" has become one of those expressions like "national security"--it is invoked to cover and justify a multitude of questionable practices that those who use it don't want anyone else to know.

How much hope can there be for General Education if the faculties are unwilling to heal themselves? The more "practical" and occupational disciplines there are on a campus, the less likely this is to happen. When we attempted General Education reform on our own campus, the working assumption, accepted without serious question by nearly all concerned, was that the various specializations and their infinitely proliferating sub-sets were all right--the real problem was the Arts and Sciences themselves. In my faculty senate, the Liberal Arts requirement was disparagingly referred to as "a full employment act for Humanists." We had reached what I consider the "reductio ad absurdum" in university curriculum--the essential was deemed the peripheral.

One thing we have learned is that the Arts and Sciences component of the curriculum is the most

important part as well as being the least expensive to teach, and that everything else is merely an application of the knowledge and concepts learned in the Arts and Sciences--and that in a volatile and changing world, they are more important than ever.

I wonder how much service we do ourselves when we persist in calling this most important part of the university curriculum "General Education?" In a culture which privileges the specialized, it is hard to convince people of the value of something which labels itself as "general." In an atmosphere in which campuses become more and more narrowly focused, faculty are rewarded for expertise in increasingly specialized areas of study--they lose perspective, if they ever had it. Allan Bloom, after likening college professors to carnival sideshow barkers trying to lure innocent students into their particular little booths, goes on to refer to something he calls the "well-kept secret":

> the colleges do not have enough to teach their students, not enough to justify keeping them four years, probably not even three years. If the focus is careers, there is hardly one specialty, outside of the hardest of the hard natural sciences, which requires more than two years of preparatory training prior to graduate studies . . . For many graduate careers, even less is really necessary . . . The so-called knowledge

> explosion and increasing specialization have not filled up the college years but emptied them . . . And in general the persons one finds in the professions need not have gone to college, if one is to judge by their tastes, their fund of learning, or their interests.
>
> (The Closing of the American Mind. 339 ff)

Faculty in the Arts and Sciences must recognize that this is the environment in which we must operate. I am certain that universities are almost the reverse of what they should be--that the truly practical studies are the Arts and Sciences, and we will come in time to see that many of the specialized applications are aberrations which society cannot afford for long. And in this environment we must do a better job of conveying that when we say "general" we are not describing the nature of what we teach, we are describing who ought to study our subject matter.

I have come some distance from my opening disclaimer about innovation, but not really. The universities must take the long view--since the 1960's there has been an absolute mania for immediate practical application, and the result has been the diminishing of most of what made the university a special and important place. Innovation without a keen

sense of our capacity for error is a bad thing. Innovation which ignores the hard-earned knowledge of the past is likewise wrong. Perhaps it is time for all of us to admit that much that was presented to us in the past as "innovative" and "forward-thinking" was simply in error. Much of the excitement and creativity of the Renaissance was the result of the re-discovery of the old; it is now time for us all to make a concerted effort to rediscover, re-affirm, and teach our students those things which first stimulated, interested, and enchanted us--what Ezra Pound has called, The "news that stays news."